

A Faith Embracing All Creatures: Addressing Commonly Asked Questions about Christian Care for Animals.

Edited by Tripp York & Andy Alexis-Baker

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Reviewed by Cristina Richie

Boston College

Cristina Richie is an ethicist and theologian in the Boston area. Her work primarily focuses on sexual ethics, ecology and bioethics. In 2013 her essay “Building a Framework for Green Bioethics: Integrating Ecology into the Medical Industry” won the Catholic Health Association (CHA) Annual Theology and Ethics Colloquium graduate student essay contest. Ms. Richie has been published in over half a dozen peer-reviewed journals and she regularly presents her work at conferences. She has previously worked as a lecturer in Bioethics at Tufts University (Medford, MA.) and is currently pursuing a PhD in theological ethics at Boston College.

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“Meat is murder, milk is rape” is the rallying cry of radical vegetarians and vegans in the developed world. Although the contributors to *A Faith Embracing All Creatures: Addressing Commonly Asked Questions about Christian Care for Animals* never use this phrase, it captures the overall sentiment of the second volume in The Peaceable Kingdom Series by editors Tripp York and Andy Alexis-Baker.

The premise of this book is laid out in the subtitle “addressing commonly asked questions about Christian care for animals.” More specifically, the book focuses on common questions modern Christian vegetarians receive about their choice to not eat meat. The book does not cover issues of animal “care” relating to the living conditions of endangered animals or circus animals; creatures bred for pets or held in captivity; protocol surrounding animals kept for experimentation; or even the mass manufacturing process of dairy farms in the United States. Instead, attention to dietary choices comes across passionately throughout the chapters. Authors are careful to delineate between factory farmed animals slaughtered and consumed and wild animals killed and consumed by indigenous populations who have no other means of survival (p. 68). The authors build their argument for moral, religious vegetarianism using Scriptural exegesis as the starting point.

The injunction to a plant-based diet in Genesis 1:29 is a staple of Christian vegetarian apologetics. Notably, all the authors who make use of this Genesis text take it as a literal record of what actually transpired at the beginning of the world. This is surprising considering the ramifications of interpreting other neighboring parts of Genesis literally, such as the possibility for rampant procreation and planetary domination (Gen. 1:28); male headship (Gen. 3:16) and, of course, the difficulty in reconciling Darwinian evolution with God’s compartmentalized creation (Gen. 1). Building a case- for or against- vegetarianism based on select passages in the Bible is problematic because of a profound cultural distance between biblical times and our own world.

While trying to push a vegetarian ideology into Scripture has made some chapters into a sort of interpretive gymnastics (ch. 5), pushing a carnivorous agenda into Scripture is equally absurd. The latter is addressed in chapters refuting claims to meat eating based on the Hebrew sacrificial system (ch. 3), the maritime Galilean community (ch. 6) and St. Paul's words regarding weak faith (ch. 8).

It would seem that in terms of diet, both carnivores and herbivores come out scratch when looking to the Bible for justifications of their eating habits. On both counts Christian ethics cannot rest on Scripture alone when Scripture does not specifically address the complexities of modern food choices. The difference in the use of animals for sustenance occasionally and by a small number of people, who slaughtered their own livestock in the Bible, is not equivalent to the mass-produced animal bodies for food consumed by nearly the entirety of the developed world today. Nonetheless, Christians have very good moral, rational reasons for opposing the slaughter and consumption of animals aside from Scripture. These arguments emerge in the brightest chapter in the book and are especially appealing to vegetarians who most often are advocating and defending their pacifist food choices against secular society, not fellow Jesus-followers.

The most impactful chapter comes late in the book and should be read first in the collection of essays since it contextualizes the urgent situation in which vegetarians- Christian and non- are writing from today. Chapter 11 focuses on animal suffering and factory farming, guiding the reader through the grisly trek that a pig makes from factory farm to dinner plate. Using Catholic social thought to make an argument against cooperation with wrongdoing, John Berkman writes with a prophetic conviction, calling a spade a spade. After enumerating the conditions of animals in factory farm he plainly states, "There's simply no moral justification for continuing to buy and consume cruelty pig meat. Doing so is ignorance, laziness, or gluttony, or perhaps all three" (p. 136). In addition to Berkman's chapter, an essay on ascetic vegetarian practices (ch. 14) round out a Bible-heavy book. Utilizing Scripture, reason and tradition to build a case for vegetarianism balanced the book while also allowing Christians from any denomination to identify with the overall objective of the collected essays. Yet the vegetarian who is already convinced of her position will be left with many questions.

Some topics that were missing in this edited volume included a serious interrogation of Christian vegetarians on points of the tension between "hospitality" (ch. 7) towards a carnivorous pet and the morally objectionable practice of purchasing pet food with meat in it; the line that each vegetarian draws between creatures we care for and those we kill (i.e. bugs or insects); the implications of a plant-based diet both for the environment, since rice is a major contributor to carbon emissions, and for the often unjust working conditions of other humans that harvest grain, vegetables and fruits to be exported to the developed world. Deep reflections are often beyond the questions Christian vegetarians field when defending their food choices and therefore this book cannot be culpable for what it did not set out to do, but vegetarians and vegans need to ask themselves further and more reflective questions. Moving beyond defense and towards offense would have been a boon to persuasive arguments for carnivores to become vegetarian and for the vegetarians reading the book- who are surely a majority of the audience- to re-evaluate their

commitment to animal care. These perhaps could be addressed in another volume and have certainly been picked up in the various publications of the authors as a collective.

Overall, the book accomplished its goals on several fronts. Its short chapters were easy to read and the bibliography helpful; it covered a breadth of troublesome biblical passages and balanced biblical ethics with reason and tradition; and it had an impressive diversity of established and new scholars and intellectuals from a variety of racial and denomination backgrounds. This book is a step towards the difficult and emotional discussion of animal treatment in the developed world. Especially where Christians are concerned, a faith that looks first to the God-ordained meaning of each creature, rather than an anthropocentric (or even biocentric) view of creation is essential. The pilgrim journey to Christ cannot be strewn with the dead bodies of sentient beings consumed and discarded for human convenience. Instead, a gradualist or virtue ethics approach allows each disciple to move closer to moral betterment. It is time for Christians to reflect: “if we have been made ‘in God’s image,’ may we not be expected to live by the law God gave us, rather than pursue the cannibalistic patterns loose in Nature?” (p. 147).